

Teaching Religion in America's Public Schools: A Necessary Disruption

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ABSTRACT. Religion plays an important role in social studies content and is difficult to ignore, especially because of current world events. In our global society, it is more important than ever to know about and understand the religious beliefs of others. The social studies curriculum is infused with religion, but teachers circumvent the issue, mistakenly citing the separation of church and state as an obstacle. This article examines assumptions and causes of our nation's confusion over the role of religion in schools. The authors conclude with suggestions for returning the study of religion to social studies classrooms.

Keywords: controversy, curriculum, religion

Americans are confused about the role of religion in schools. On one hand, we have been taught about the separation of church and state. This concept is frequently misunderstood, as we shall see, but it guides the thinking

of many educators who claim that principle as a reason to avoid the topic of religion entirely.

On the other hand, most educators accept that education about religion is essential to understanding the content of social studies (Greenawalt 2005; Nord and Haynes 1998). Indeed, it is instrumental in reaching one of the main goals of American schools: the development of active citizens. Without studying religion, how can a student possibly understand such topics as the Crusades; religious persecution; the formation of India and Pakistan; and the election of John F. Kennedy, America's first Catholic president—not to mention more recent events and controversies, such as 9/11; the Israeli-Palestinian dispute; the edicts of Pope Benedict; and the positions of the Christian right on abortion, gay rights, and stem cell research?

The power of this content helps explain why almost every state and school district curriculum makes reference to increasing students' knowledge of world religions. The challenge is not getting such content into the curriculum; it is already there. The challenge is getting teachers to teach the content.

Religion is not absent from classrooms; because most teachers are accustomed to traditional approaches

to community and school celebrations, religious subtexts often emerge. Teachers and schools engage in such activities as displaying Christmas decorations, singing traditional songs with religious connotations, and reciting sectarian prayers in the classroom.

To address the challenge of teaching about religion without proselytizing, we must explore the assumptions and causes underlying each set of factors in our national confusion over the role of religion in public schools. There is a way out. Although it may be disruptive, it is necessary, even crucial, to follow the route of teaching about religion if we wish to maintain the principle of religious tolerance that undergirds the democratic republic that has evolved for more than two hundred years.

Church and State

The U.S. Constitution explicitly addresses the relationship between church and state, forming the basis for further debate and guidelines on this issue. To understand the constitutional guidelines regarding the intersection of government and religion, we must consider the historical antecedents of the policies. By doing so, we are introducing the topic of religion into this article.

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We cannot teach history without teaching about religion any more than we could prepare beer without using yeast. Something crucial would be missing.

Many of the European groups that first settled in North America came to escape religious persecution. The best-known are the Pilgrims and Puritans who settled in Massachusetts because their refusal to conform to the Church of England made it impossible for them to remain in England. To practice their religion as they wished, they moved first to Holland and ultimately across the Atlantic to their new home at Plymouth. Quakers fled England for similar reasons, settling in Pennsylvania, and a group of English Catholics arrived in Maryland to exercise their own religious freedom.

Ironically, religious intolerance arose even among these first settlers, forcing Roger Williams to found a new colony in Rhode Island when the Puritan leaders of Massachusetts discriminated against those who shared his alternative views of God and religious practice. At the same time, Spanish settlers in the South and West were slaughtering Native Americans who refused to convert to Catholicism. When African slaves were brought to the New World, they too were deprived of their native religions, along with the rest of their freedoms.

During the colonial period in America, various philosophers argued against the concept of a state religion, viewing it as a dangerous practice that would limit individual freedom. This movement influenced our founders to create a constitution that was neutral with regard to religion. The word *neutral* is an important concept that will receive further elaboration.

Although the language of the original Constitution was neutral with regard to religion, the matter of religious freedom was not explicitly addressed until after the Philadelphia Constitutional Convention in 1787. Several colonies refused to endorse the new document unless it specifically protected various freedoms. In response, a group of leaders prepared the Bill of Rights, which comprised the first ten amendments to the Constitution. With the passage of

the Bill of Rights, the term *freedom of religion* became the official policy of the new nation.

Interpreting the Separation of Church and State as It Applies to Schools

The First Amendment to the Constitution reads, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” This “Establishment Clause” does not say anything about the teaching of religion, only that our government may not promote or endorse a religion, nor may it stop people from freely practicing their religion. Thus, we say that the state must be neutral with regard to religion.

When the Bill of Rights was written and when, in 1802, President Thomas Jefferson referred to a “wall of separation between church and state,” there were no state-authorized public schools. Education was primarily the province of churches, which designated religious education as their foremost purpose. Public schools as we know them today did not begin until the late 1800s, when, ironically, Massachusetts Protestants felt threatened by the influx of Irish immigrant children to the streets of Boston and sought to Americanize them through a public educational system, thereby avoiding the possible expansion of Roman Catholic schools.

The first public schools included religious instruction in the curriculum, instruction specifically designed to promote Protestant ways of thinking. Over time, a series of Supreme Court rulings applied the Establishment Clause to schools, thereby prohibiting schools from celebrating particular religions, or even from promoting religion over secular belief systems. Most schools discontinued the practice of public prayer, holiday celebrations with religious themes, and—taking matters to the extreme—teaching about religion altogether (Ayers and Reid 2005; Glanzer 1998; Hollander and Saypol 1976; Marty 2000).

Churches, meanwhile, continued to offer parochial religious education. Many children went to church schools to

learn about their own religions on Sundays or after school. Many others learned religion at home from their families. This pattern has remained constant.

Parents who preferred more intensive religious teaching sought out non-governmental schools. They objected to the absence of instruction in their own particular religious views (Jeynes 1998). In other words, they wanted a merger of education and religion—as long as it included their own sectarian beliefs.

Parents seem comfortable with children knowing their own religions without venturing into the beliefs or practices of others. Their goal, after all, is usually indoctrination. Parents, understandably, want their children to be like themselves. They are not interested in having children make religious choices that differ from family traditions, based on the study of comparative religion. The absence of religion in public schools therefore seems to be just fine with the public (Marty 2000).

One of the authors suffered personally from a lack of knowledge about religion. Although he excelled in social studies, he did not learn about world religions, or even American religions, in school. In his neighborhood, there were Catholics and Jews. He had heard of Protestants but did not know any. Needless to say, this gap in his education meant that he lacked a realistic view of the world. This handicapped him when he moved to the South, where Protestants dominate. He did not know the difference between a Baptist and a Methodist, a distinction that was important to his neighbors. He was also unprepared to study current events that required an understanding of the quarrels between various religious groups. We shudder to hear acquaintances make ill-informed statements about other religions, but we cannot blame them. They were never taught the content.

The Rise of Multicultural Education

The gap in religious knowledge has become more serious in recent years because of changing patterns of integration in the United States, a situation that is also being experienced throughout

Europe. The newest pattern is the growing presence of cultures that do not conform to the Judeo-Christian religious tradition that previously characterized the vast majority of Americans. In the past in this nation of immigrants, Americans were somewhat more likely to accept the arrival of Italians, Poles, Puerto Ricans, Scandinavians, and Russians, because the newcomers engaged in similar religious practices.

Of course, there have always been small segments with other beliefs in this country, including Hindus, Muslims, Native Americans, and others, but these groups tended to avoid confrontation. This tendency was helped by housing patterns in which members of religious groups were likely to live in the same areas (Hirschman 2004; Rebhun 1995). Thus, in areas like urban Chinatowns, Indian reservations, and heavily Jewish suburbs, the minority groups dominated the schools, which enabled them to ignore the dominant religious customs practiced outside their enclaves and integrate their own religious customs in the schools.

The segregated housing patterns held for the flood of Asian immigrants in the 1980s. Despite the major increase in Japanese, Chinese, Vietnamese, Filipino, and Asian Indian populations, these groups, following previous patterns, settled in relatively homogenous neighborhoods (Hirschman 2004). Unlike their predecessors, however, these immigrants' numbers were not large enough to dominate nearby schools. Because Hindu and Buddhist practices were so unfamiliar to the majority of Judeo-Christian Americans, a call was made by leading social studies educators to endorse the newly developed movement for "multicultural education" (Passe 1999). One of the purposes of this movement was to insure that students would learn about not only their own cultures, but also those of others.

The relatively neutral word *culture* includes religion but also food, dress, language, arts, and everyday customs of behavior. Most educators who endorsed or implemented multicultural education would tiptoe around or ignore any in-depth study of religion.

The issue of religious knowledge reached the forefront after 9/11, when Americans began to recognize how little they knew about Islam. Europeans have been wrestling with that same realization for decades, as they have experienced large influxes of North African and Turkish immigrants into their once relatively homogenous cultures.

A series of events following 9/11 demonstrated American ignorance of religion. We saw Hindus and Sikhs, mistakenly identified as Muslims, experience discrimination and worse. We heard jokes that ridiculed Islam or generalized about the entire religion on the basis of the conduct of a small group of terrorists. Xenophobia and intolerance abounded.

American society has taken commendable steps to alleviate these situations and provide some remedial education for society at large, including sensitive media coverage (Ayers and Reid 2005). Yet these steps are insufficient. They are not focused on the school curriculum and are neither systematic nor comprehensive.

How to Change

The challenge of meeting Americans' needs to understand their own and their neighbors' religions involves both curricular and instructional adjustments, all of which disrupt the status quo. The curriculum must focus more on cultural anthropology, with a special emphasis on comparative religion. This policy change cannot occur without substantial public support. Unfortunately, currents today are moving in the opposite direction. Social studies, which includes anthropology, is gradually disappearing from the elementary and middle school curriculum in favor of literacy and mathematics. Elementary teachers are skipping the topic altogether, and middle school teachers who teach social studies as part of a block are increasingly likely to de-emphasize social studies goals. This is primarily a result of the No Child Left Behind legislation, which appears to be narrowing the curriculum. Secondary school social studies, which is set by

time periods and not influenced by No Child Left Behind, does not suffer from a loss of teaching time for the subject but is affected by the emphasis on high-stakes, end-of-grade tests. These tests, which tend to control what is taught and emphasized, seldom include questions related to anthropology or religious knowledge (Kleinfeld 2002).

To put the matter in a humorous perspective, it is like the old joke about how many psychologists it takes to change a light bulb. The answer is, "Just one, but the light bulb has to want to change." In this case, our society must accept that our citizens' lack of knowledge about religion is unacceptable. This can only happen with a major campaign that communicates the benefits of religious knowledge in promoting better relations with the Muslims in the next house, the Hindu in the marketplace, the Greek Orthodox coworker, the Seventh-Day Adventist in the next state, or the legions of religious sects everywhere.

We will not offer a treatise on globalization. The ease of interacting with others around the world has become apparent. Yet our society must be alerted to the social upheaval that accompanies globalization. These changes must be presented honestly, with both positive and negative consequences. Many scholars believe that the American public would support greater emphasis on religion in the curriculum if (1) it can be presented as a way to promote harmony, peace, and economic progress and (2) it can be accomplished fairly, without indoctrination (Boston 2007; Nord 1994; Nord and Haynes 1998).

This brings us to a different curricular challenge, which is much more daunting. Most teachers lack the knowledge to teach about world religions (Glanzer 1998; Wright 1999). Indeed, teachers' lack of a firm foundation regarding comparative religion has been proposed as one of the main obstacles in overcoming their tendency to avoid the topic (Jeynes 1998; Nord 1994).

To make matters worse, American teachers also lack the skills required to teach the content appropriately. A single preservice course in social studies methods is insufficient for teachers

to develop instructional techniques that promote tolerance, sensitivity, nonjudgmental expression of beliefs, and an in-depth grasp of the nuances of major world religions. This is especially true for elementary teachers, who are increasingly likely to have gaps in their knowledge of basic social studies, let alone cultural anthropology (Ayers and Reid 2005; Marty 2000).

already exist. If there were a greater demand for them, the supply would increase. It all comes down to developing that demand.

Marshaling the Effort

The impetus for this change must be led by pre-K–12 social studies educators. Because they are knowledgeable

few leading religious organizations as partners would surely confer legitimacy and status on the movement for religious education.

Governmental policymakers should also be invited to be part of the movement. Governors, legislators, and school boards have the most direct control of the school curriculum, professional development agenda, and—most important—the purse strings that would fund any changes.

Opposition could be expected from fundamentalists within each denomination. Although most make up only a fraction of the denomination's total membership, their voices are loud and often well connected. Their fear of syncretism, the mixing of religions, echoes longstanding concerns in many religious traditions, most notably Christianity, that have persisted until recently (Droogers 1989).

Because syncretism is decidedly not the aim of this proposal, the educational program's objectives must be clearly stated and reinforced. The legitimate concerns of those worried about dilution of their belief systems should be directly addressed. One way to prevent significant opposition would be to include representatives from various groups in the development of a revised religious education curriculum.

A greater threat would probably come from educational traditionalists, who are cautious about any major curricular change, especially one having to do with religion. Specific objections may involve the perceived dangers of any changes, along with the cost and difficulty of such moves. These objections must be challenged by emphasizing the intense and growing need for interreligious understanding. Disruption is a hallmark of any major change and should be expected and prepared for. Disruptive as it may be, our society needs instruction in religion. It always has and probably always will.

Conclusion

Social educators have always played a special role in adapting the curriculum to the changing needs of society.

A single preservice course in social studies methods is insufficient for teachers to develop instructional techniques that promote tolerance, sensitivity, nonjudgmental expression of beliefs, and an in-depth grasp of the nuances of major world religions.

Thus, American schools are not ready to teach religion. It would be the blind leading the blind, resulting in the transmission of bias, misconceptions, and harmful stereotypes. A single in-service workshop will not suffice. Teachers will require a comprehensive training program that relies heavily on the development of high-quality curriculum materials, both for teacher training and for use in the pre-K–12 classroom. Such a program will demand a large investment by governments and possibly foundations as well.

Once the proper professional development opportunities are offered, their implementation must be strongly supported by administrators. This effort must be clearly communicated to parents and other citizens, and communications should stress that the schools are teaching *about* religion, not teaching children what to believe. It is to be expected that some parents fear indoctrination and need to be reassured. It is also to be expected that a minority of parents and citizens object to any presentation about religion that does not promote their particular viewpoints. Such reactions must be recognized as those of a small minority as we promote the benefits of a religious education curriculum.

As for curricular materials, excellent nonbiased methods and materials

about the curriculum, insightful regarding student performance in the subject area, and skilled in educating others about issues, their voices are likely to be heard by the public. A coordinated series of letters to the editor, presentations to PTAs and other community groups, and consultations with sympathetic policymakers should begin the process.

The National Council for the Social Studies and its various affiliates would be logical leaders of the effort. Other academic organizations, such as the American Anthropology Association and American Academy of Religion, would provide strong scholarly support.

For teachers' voices to be heeded, however, alliances are necessary. Fortunately, there are powerful groups both inside and outside of government that would join this effort. The National Conference for Community and Justice would make a strong ally. Formerly known as the National Conference of Christians and Jews, it changed its name in the 1990s to become more inclusive.

Contrary to what some may expect, religious denominations would probably not oppose this effort. Every major religious group appears to have a program devoted to interreligious dialogue. Each, apparently, has its own public relations challenges and seeks greater understanding from others. Having a

By planning a campaign to reintroduce religion to the school curriculum, they can help the United States adjust to the new challenges that have come with globalization. A well-planned effort may lead to a stronger society, one in which religious differences are understood, appreciated, and even celebrated. The alternative is further fraying of the bonds that hold the country together. Although the topic of religion can be disruptive, both in society at large and in schools, we need to talk about it in responsible ways. Teachers can be leaders in demonstrating how to do it well.

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